

Perceived Discrimination and Peer Victimization Among African American and Latino Youth

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Abstract Perceptions of racial discrimination constitute significant risks to the psychological adjustment of minority youth. The present study examined the relationship between perceived racial discrimination and peer nominations of victimization among 173 (55 % female) African American, European American and Latino youth. All respondents completed peer nominations of victimization status whereas the African American and Latino youth completed subjective measures of racial discrimination. The results indicated that African American and Latino's subjective perceptions of racial discrimination were linked to nominations of overt and relational victimization when rated by their European American peers. The results suggest that there is consistency between African American and Latino youth's perceptions of racial discrimination and nominations of peer victimization by their European American peers.

Keywords Perceived discrimination · Peer victimization · Sociometric ratings · Blacks · Latinos · Adolescents

Introduction

There is a growing body of research that has indicated that minority youth may be the victims of peer victimization because of their membership in racial/ethnic minority groups rather than personal reasons (Lai and Tov 2004). Additionally, majority adolescents have reported more instances of personal victimization, whereas minority adolescents have

reported more experiences of ethnic discrimination (Verkuyten and Jochem 2006). There is also burgeoning research suggesting that the majority of African American and Latino youth perceive themselves to be the victims of racial discrimination using survey and daily diary methods (Gibbons et al. 2004; Huynh and Fuligni 2010). Despite the similarities between subjective perceptions of racial discrimination and peer victimization due to race/ethnicity, no published research has examined the consistency between these constructs among African American and Latino adolescents.

The Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) model is the framework used in the present study for examining the relationship between racial discrimination and peer victimization among African American and Latino youth. PVEST is a theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between risk and protective factors, challenges and supports, reactive coping, emergent identities and specific outcomes (Spencer et al. 2003). The model articulates the specific interactions among contextual and personal risk factors, how individuals' perceive challenges and supports, how risk factors are coped with, how long-term coping contributes to emerging identities and how these identities influence life stage outcomes (Spencer 2006). The model is comprehensive and recursive, which proposes developmental processes for all individuals regardless of race/ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status or other demographic variables. Though PVEST is the theoretical framework adopted for the present study, the current study is only examining specific aspects of the model among African American and Latino adolescents. Consistent with the model, we conceptualize racial discrimination as a risk factor for African American and Latino youth. The model also discusses the importance of the peer group, particularly for adolescents (Spencer 2006). Consequently, we suggest that being labeled a victim by one's peers is a risk factor for

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minority youth, which contributes to their net vulnerability. The purpose of the present study is to examine the consistency of two proposed risk factors: subjective perceptions of peer racial discrimination and peer nominations of victimization among a sample of African American and Latino youth. Specifically, we examined the degree of consistency between subjective reports of racial discrimination for African American and Latino youth with nominations of peer victimization from their African American, European American and Latino raters.

Peer Victimization

Peer victimization is defined as physical, verbal or psychological abuse that occurs in or around school when adult supervision is minimal (Graham 2006). Though conflict among peers may be normative, victimization is distinct as it includes the intention to cause harm resulting from an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim (Olweus 1993). There are different types of peer victimization with overt aggression including physical or verbal harassment, whereas relational aggression includes the deliberate manipulation of social relationships or social standing (Smith et al. 2002). Victimization can also involve social category memberships such as race/ethnicity (Verkuyten and Jochem 2006). Yet, the bulk of prior empirical research has focused on victimization for personal reasons and has rarely considered situations where children are treated negatively because of their racial/ethnic background (see Deater-Deckard 2001; Hawker and Boulton 2000, for reviews).

There is a growing body of research that has focused on the victimization experiences of racial/ethnic minority youth. One study indicated that 26 % of Hispanic students, 22 % of Asian students, 18 % of multiethnic students and 7 % of African American students reported that they had been victimized because of their race, ethnicity or national origin (Lai and Tov 2004). Another study indicated that Asian/Pacific Islanders and African American students reported more victimization than their Native American, Hispanic and White peers (Felix and You 2011). Additional research also has shown that minority youth report more instances of victimization due to their race/ethnicity than their non-minority counterparts. For example, one study examined victimization among Dutch and ethnic minority youth in the Netherlands, and the results indicated that Dutch participants reported more instances of personal victimization, whereas ethnic minorities reported more experiences of ethnic discrimination (Verkuyten and Jochem 2006). Additional research conducted among Canadian students, indicated that 17 % of elementary and high school students reported that they had been bullied by a student from another ethnic group, and that ethnic elementary students were more likely to report ethnic victimization (Pepler et al. 1999).

Lastly, one study illustrated that ethnic students believed that their fellow minority peers were more likely to be bullied than their majority peers (Siann et al. 1994). Thus, growing research suggests that one of reasons for peer victimization may be membership in a racial or ethnic minority group.

Racial Discrimination

Racial discrimination consists of dominant group members' actions, which are systematic and result in differential and negative effects on subordinate racial/ethnic groups (Williams et al. 2003). Prior research using survey methods has shown that perceptions of racially discriminatory treatment are quite prevalent among African American adolescents. For example, 77 % of African American adolescents reported experiencing at least one discriminatory incident in the past 3 months (Prellow et al. 2004), 87 % of African American youth reported experiencing discrimination in the previous year (Seaton et al. 2008) and 91 % of pre-adolescent African Americans reported experiencing at least one racially discriminatory experience in their lifetime (Gibbons et al. 2004). Recent research has examined perceptions of racial discrimination in online settings and the results indicated that 32 % of African American adolescents reported being the victim of online racial discrimination at least once in their lifetime with a small minority (~2 %) reporting some form of online racial discrimination every day (Tynes et al. 2012). The empirical research has consistently shown that the majority of Black youth perceive themselves to be the victim of discriminatory treatment.

Prior research conducted among Hispanic or Latino youth has shown that perceptions of discriminatory treatment are prevalent. For example, approximately half of Puerto Rican adolescents (49 %) reported perceiving racial/ethnic discrimination directed against them in at least one situation, and 47 % indicated that they were worried about being discriminated against in at least one situation (Szalacha et al. 2003). Prior research also indicates that the majority of Latino youth reported experiencing some form of adult and peer discrimination with 12 % reporting daily incidents of discrimination on 1 day or more (Huynh and Fuligni 2010). In two other studies of Mexican-origin adolescents, most reported at least one experience of racial/ethnic discrimination (64 and 76 %, respectively), and adolescents reported that chronic incidents of insults, including derogatory ethnic jokes, were the most stressful experiences (Edwards and Romero 2008; Romero and Roberts 2003). Additional research conducted among Mexican-American adolescents indicated that most (94 %) adolescents reported at least one experience of racial/ethnic discrimination, and 21 % had often experienced racial/ethnic discrimination (Flores et al. 2010). Thus, racially discriminatory experiences appear to be pervasive and ubiquitous for African American and Latino adolescents.

We examined subjective reports of racial discrimination among African American and Latino adolescents. The bulk of prior research has not distinguished the perpetrators of racial discrimination, though Black and Latino youth experience racially discriminatory treatment from adults and peers (Huynh and Fuligni 2010; Rosenbloom and Way 2004; Fisher et al. 2000). In the current study, we examined subjective reports of racial discrimination from peers in the school setting (Way 1997) to examine the consistency of peer victimization nominations with subjective reports of peer racial discrimination.

The Present Study

The current study examined subjective reports of peer racial discrimination as predictors of peer victimization among African American and Latino adolescents. Given the burgeoning research documenting that minority youth are victimized because of their membership in racial/ethnic groups (Verkuyten and Jochem 2006), we assessed whether reports of subjective racial discrimination from peers predicted the degree to which an adolescent was nominated as a victim of overt and relational aggression by their peers. Though peer nominations also could predict subjective experiences of racial discrimination, the interest in the current study is to examine whether subjective reports predict peer nominations. The use of peer nominations was consistent with prior research identifying which youth are more likely to be victimized by their peers. Though the use of peer nominations does not include an attribution for the victimization, we include peer nominations from African American, Latino and European American peers. We anticipated that the use of intra and interracial nominators would indicate consistency within and across racial groups.

We used a measure of peer racial discrimination (Way 1997) that was truncated to reflect five items (e.g., harass you, pick on you) that were consistent with the peer nominations of victimization. The intention is to examine whether African American and Latino youths' report of peer racial discrimination were predictive of their being nominated as overt and relational victims by their African American, Latino and European American peers. We controlled for ethnicity in the analyses given that prior research indicates racial/ethnic differences in reports of peer victimization (Lai and Tov 2004; Felix and You 2011).

Method

Participants

Initially, 712 students in the 9th grade of a rural, lower income community in the Southeastern part of the country

were recruited for participation in the peer relations study. Of the total, 533 (75 %) returned consent forms and 426 consented to participate. Data from approximately 27 participants were unavailable so full data were available for 399 adolescents. The resulting sample included White (N = 191), African American (N = 94), Latino (N = 79), Asian American (N = 32) and Native American (N = 3) youth. The Latino sample includes participants of Mexican origin with a small minority from Puerto Rico, Honduras and El Salvador. Approximately 19 % of adolescents reported that their parents were never married; 32 % reported that their parents had separated or divorced. The majority of adolescents reported that they lived in a household with two adults (47 % with two biological parents; 30 % with a parent and a step-parent, grandparent, or other relative); 23 % reported living in a single-parent household. The study utilizes peer nominations as rated by the White, African American and Latino participants (N = 364). The study also utilizes perceptions of racial discrimination from the African American and Latino participants (N = 173), which includes an equivalent sample of females (55 %).

Procedures

All students in the ninth grade at three high schools were recruited to participate in the study, with the exception of students in self-contained special education classes. A letter of consent initially was distributed to each adolescent's family followed by a series of reminders and additional letters distributed directly to teens by school and research personnel. Recruitment involved a description of a study regarding "peer relationships and adjustment" with no mention of ethnicity. Response forms included an option for parents to grant or deny consent; adolescents were asked to return their signed response form regardless of their parents' decision. Numerous adolescent-, teacher-, and school-based incentives were used to ensure the return of these consent forms. Consent return rates and consent rates were not significantly different across ethnic groups.

Measures

Peer Victimization

Sociometric assessments were conducted to obtain measures of overt and relational peer victimization. Consistent with prior peer relations research, adolescents were presented with an alphabetized roster of all grademates (Franzoi et al. 1994; Inderbitzen et al. 1997; Matza et al. 2001), and asked to select an unlimited number of peers that "get threatened or physically hurt by others" and "get left out of activities, ignored by others because one of their

friends is mad at them, gossiped about, or has mean things said behind their back,” to measure overt and relational victimization, respectively. The order of alphabetized names on rosters was counterbalanced (e.g., Z through A) to control for possible effects of alphabetization on nominee selection. Using sociometric procedures, it is possible to obtain an ecologically-valid measure of peer status that is not influenced by adolescents’ self-report. Data from sociometric nominations widely are considered the most reliable and valid indices of acceptance and rejection among peers (Coie and Dodge 1983). Due to the unique goals of this study, sociometric data were coded to reflect the ethnicity of the nominator of peer victimization (Rock et al. 2011). Specifically, three sets of scores were computed by separately calculating summary scores based on European–American peers’ nominations, African–American peers’ nominations, and Latino–American peers’ nominations. First, all nominations provided by European–American peers were tabulated. For each sociometric item, a sum of nominations each student received from European–American nominators was computed and standardized within grade, yielding measures of overt victimization rated by European American peers and relational victimization rated by European American peers, with higher scores indicating greater peer victimization. A second set of scores then was computed in an identical fashion using only peer nominations provided by African–American peers (i.e., overt victimization by African American peers; relational victimization by African American peers). Last, comparable measures were computed to reflect overt victimization by Latino peers; relational victimization by Latino peers.

Perceived Discrimination

The frequency of discriminatory experiences was assessed with the 21-item Adolescent Perpetrator Experiences Peer

Scale (Way 1997). This measure was developed from qualitative techniques with urban, African American and Latino youth and designed to assess unfair treatment suffered by peers in their respective schools that may be attributed to membership in a subordinate racial/ethnic group (Way 1997). This is a self-report measure that assesses the frequency of this treatment with no specific time frame ($\alpha = .91$). Participants were presented with a list of experiences and asked to indicate how often other students in school treat them a certain way (0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often, 4 = all the time). For the present study, a subset of five perceived racial discrimination items were used that were indicative of discrimination related to victimization. The items included “make fun of you”, “pick on you”, “call you names”, “insult you” and “harass you” because of your race or ethnicity.

Results

The correlations, means and standard deviations for the study variables are presented in Table 1. Descriptive analyses revealed that African American ($M = 1.36, SD = .74$) and Latino ($M = 1.39, SD = .70$) youth generally perceived low levels of racial discrimination. Hierarchical regressions were conducted to examine if peer nominations of victimization by multiple raters were linked to subjective perceptions of peer racial discrimination for African American and Latino youth. Ethnicity was controlled before regressing measures of peer victimization on subjective perceptions of peer racial discrimination. Given the number of regression analyses performed, a Bonferroni correction was used such that results had to be significant at the .008 level (.05/6).

Table 1 Correlations, means, and standard deviations for the study variables

Variable	Ethnicity	PD	OV by AA	OV by EA	OV by LA	RV by AA	RV by EA	RV by LA
Ethnicity ^a	–							
PD	.02	–						
OV by AA	–.36**	.24**	–					
OV by EA	.01	.41**	.44**	–				
OV by LA	.02	.20*	.32**	.46**	–			
RV by AA	–.38**	.19*	.51**	.35**	.19*	–		
RV by EA	–.04	.26**	.42**	.44**	.33**	.18*	–	
RV by LA	.28**	.03	.05	.21**	.25**	.04	.23**	–
M	–	1.37	.16	–.18	–.02	.25	–.29	–.04
SD	–	.72	1.26	.54	.93	1.22	.43	.94

PD perceived discrimination, OV overt victimization, RV relational victimization, AA African American, EA European American, LA Latino

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

^a n. 1 = African American, 2 = Latino

Perceived Discrimination as a Predictor of Overt Victimization

The results for African American raters suggest that ethnicity, or being African American, was associated with increased nominations of overt victimization by African American raters ($B = -.89, p < .001$) (see Table 2). The results also suggest that increased perceptions of racial discrimination from African American and Latino youth were associated with increased nominations of overt victimization by African American raters ($B = .44, p < .001$). In other words, the more African American and Latino youth reported racially discriminatory incidents, the more they were likely to be rated as victims of overt victimization by their African American peers.

The results for European American raters were similar in that increased perceptions of racial discrimination from African American and Latino youth were associated with increased nominations of overt victimization by European American raters ($B = .31, p < .001$) (see Table 3). The more African American and Latino youth reported racially discriminatory incidents, the more they were likely to be rated as victims of overt victimization by their European American peers. The results for Latino raters regarding overt victimization were not significant at the corrected Bonferroni level (see Table 4).

Perceived Discrimination as a Predictor of Relational Victimization

The results for African American raters suggest that ethnicity, or being African American, also was associated with

Table 2 Perceived discrimination as a predictor of overt victimization rated by African Americans

Predictors	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>B</i>	<i>Se</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Se</i>
Ethnicity	-.89**	.20	-.90**	.19
Perceived discrimination	–	–	.44**	.13
Total R ²	.12		.18	

** $p < .001$

Table 3 Perceived discrimination as a predictor of overt victimization rated by European Americans

Predictors	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>B</i>	<i>Se</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Se</i>
Ethnicity	.05	.09	.04	.08
Perceived discrimination	–	–	.31**	.06
Total R ²	.00		.17	

** $p < .001$

increased nominations of relational victimization by African American raters ($B = -.92, p < .001$) (see Table 5). In other words, African American participants were more likely to rate other African American and Latino youth as victims of relational victimization. The results for European American raters suggest that increased perceptions of racial discrimination from African American and Latino youth were associated with increased nominations of relational victimization from European American raters ($B = .16, p < .001$) (see Table 6). Thus, the more African American and Latino youth reported racially discriminatory incidents, the more they were likely to be rated as victims of relational victimization by their European American peers. Finally, the results for Latino raters suggest that ethnicity, or being Latino, was associated with increased nominations of relational victimization from Latino raters ($B = .58, p < .001$) (see Table 7). Latino participants were more likely to rate other Latino youth as victims of relational victimization.

Table 4 Perceived discrimination as a predictor of overt victimization rated by Latinos

Predictors	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>B</i>	<i>Se</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Se</i>
Ethnicity	.07	.15	.07	.15
Perceived discrimination	–	–	.26	.11
Total R ²	.00		.04	

Table 5 Perceived discrimination as a predictor of relational victimization rated by African Americans

Predictors	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>B</i>	<i>Se</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Se</i>
Ethnicity	-.92**	.19	-.93**	.18
Perceived discrimination	–	–	.34	.13
Total R ²	.14		.18	

** $p < .001$

Table 6 Perceived discrimination as a predictor of relational victimization rated by European Americans

Predictors	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>B</i>	<i>Se</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Se</i>
Ethnicity	-.02	.07	-.02	.07
Perceived discrimination	–	–	.16**	.05
Total R ²	.00		.07	

** $p < .001$

Table 7 Perceived discrimination as a predictor of relational victimization rated by Latinos

Predictors	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>B</i>	<i>Se</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Se</i>
Ethnicity	.58**	.15	.58**	.15
Perceived discrimination	–	–	.03	.11
Total R ²	.09		.09	

** $p < .001$

Discussion

The literature is clear that perceptions of racial discrimination constitute significant risks to the healthy psychological adjustment of racial and ethnic minority youth (e.g., Brody et al. 2006; Seaton et al. 2011; Umaña-Taylor and Guimond 2012). In previous work examining the impact of racial discrimination on adjustment, one concern has been the extent to which perceptions of discrimination are consistent with actual experiences of discrimination or unfair treatment. For example, some have suggested that perceptions of discrimination may be due to the impact of mental health problems or other dispositional attributes such as neuroticism (Gee and Walsemann 2009; Thompson 1987). In our study, we took an initial step in exploring this issue by investigating the extent to which racial and ethnic minority youths' perceptions of racial discrimination might map onto actual instances of victimization due to discrimination. We capitalized on the strengths of well-validated sociometric popularity methods to capture an external, objective measure of victimization. We then used peer nominations of victimization to evaluate correspondence with African American and Latino youths' perceptions of racial discrimination, while also taking into account the race and ethnicity of the peer raters.

Perceived Discrimination as a Predictor of Peer Victimization

We found that youths' perceptions of racial discrimination were associated positively with the increased likelihood of being perceived by peers as victims of overt and relational aggression, though the associations differed depending on the race or ethnicity of the raters. In the case of overt victimization, we found that individuals' ratings of perceived discrimination mapped onto both African American and European American peers' ratings of victimization status, but not Latino peers' ratings. With regard to relational aggression, we found that youths' perceptions of discrimination mapped onto European American peers' ratings of victimization status. These findings highlight two important points. First, the race or ethnicity of the peer

rating victimization status matters in our understanding of the relationship between perceptions of discrimination and peers' ratings. Although speculative, the fact that African American and Latino youths' perceptions of discrimination did not map onto Latino peers' ratings of victimization could suggest that Latino peers' view of the social context or ratings of what constitutes victimization due to overt or relational aggression may differ from African American and European American peers' ratings of the same constructs. Second, the type of victimization under consideration matters. The pattern of association between perceptions of discrimination and peers' ratings of victimization was slightly different for relational aggression—though consistent for European American raters. One remaining question is the extent to which Black and Latino youth experience relational aggression relative to other groups. Sawyer et al. (2008) found that Black and Hispanic girls were more likely to experience direct physical victimization than White girls. Thus, the relationship between racial discrimination and relational victimization may be constrained by the low base rates of relational aggression for African American and Latino youth.

Since we did not ask peers to specifically rate victimization experiences that were due to racial discrimination (leaving open the possibility that victimization experiences were not racially motivated), it is important to consider whether there are alternative explanations for why youths' perceptions of discrimination might map onto peers' victimization ratings in the absence of actual racial discrimination. In other words, are there other reasons why youth who perceive more discrimination might be more likely to be perceived as victims even though they are not actually victimized due to race or ethnicity? One possibility is that perceived discrimination might be related to other intermediary variables, which might, in turn, be related to victimization ratings (i.e., the relationship between discrimination and victimization status is mediated by an unmeasured “third” variables). Prior work in the area of racial identity suggests that high race central individuals—individuals for whom race is a central aspect of their identity—and African Americans with low public regard who believe that others do not see African Americans favorably, report experiencing more discrimination (e.g., Neblett et al. 2004; Sellers and Shelton 2003). It may be that racial identity partially mediates the association between perceived discrimination and perceived victimization status such that high race central individuals and/or individuals who endorse low public regard are more likely to be perceived as victims or experience victimization. This hypothesis suggests that there may be aspects of individuals or maybe even ways that individuals interact with their environments that make them more likely to be victimized even though the underlying motivation for victimization

may be due to non-discrimination related factors. This suggestion should not be interpreted as a “blame the victim” approach; rather, we allow the possibility that individual characteristics also may play a role in both perceptions of discrimination and perceptions of who is likely to be victimized. It is indeed possible that instances of discrimination directly correspond to greater victimization and also that individuals who report greater perceptions of discrimination may engage the environment in ways that make them more likely to be victims through no wrongdoing of their own. Scholars have suggested, for example, that African Americans who have had more experiences with discrimination may cope more assertively (e.g., confronting or speaking out against such transgressions; Barksdale et al. 2009; Krieger and Sidney 1996) as a result of more opportunities to practice their coping repertoire (Neblett et al. 2004). Although these coping strategies may be adaptive in their own right, they also might increase the likelihood that individuals are targeted or victimized for reasons that are unrelated to race. Such hypotheses will require more refined methodology and fine-tuned analyses for assessment.

Study Limitations and Future Directions

Although there are several strengths in the current investigation, there are several limitations to consider. First, we have assumed that peers’ ratings of victimization status serve as a reasonable indicator of youths’ discrimination experiences. Since it is not standard practice to ask about the reason for victimization, future studies would benefit from taking the additional step of asking about victimization due to racial or ethnic status. Second, while the approach used in the present study relies on a view of victimization that is not influenced by adolescents’ self-report, it is important to acknowledge that ratings of victimization status are themselves subjective ratings, and not observable instances of actual discrimination. Future studies may be strengthened by observational studies (e.g., audit studies) of youth interactions that are perceived by youth to be related to their racial and ethnic minority status. Such investigations might yield additional data about the extent to which perceptions of discrimination map onto actual observable behaviors (although this too will require some level of assumption regarding the underlying reasons for the behavior). Third, the overall levels of perceived discrimination in our sample were relatively low. It will be interesting to see whether the current study findings hold in a sample with a broader range and frequency of racial discrimination experiences. Fourth, the present study examined perceived discrimination as a concurrent predictor of victimization status. Our understanding of the temporal ordering of the association between perceived

discrimination and victimization status is necessarily strained since our measurement of discrimination captured instances with an ambiguous time frame, and peers’ ratings of victimization status could reflect incidents of victimization across a broad time period within or beyond a 1-year timeframe. Although we were interested primarily in the cross-sectional nature of the association in this study, it may be useful to examine how these relationships play out over time. For example, one set of unanswered questions is whether the cumulative effects of greater levels of discrimination are likely to translate into or have a cascading effect that leads to a greater likelihood of becoming victimized or a target of victimization over time, and if so, by what mechanisms.

Conclusion

In this study, we used an innovative methodological approach to examine the extent to which youths’ perceptions of discrimination might map onto actual victimization experiences as measured by youths’ peers. Our results suggest that youth who report greater instances of discrimination are indeed more likely to be victimized by others. Thus, it would appear that peers’ victimization ratings *could* provide partial verification of youths’ perceptions of discrimination. In light of the detrimental correlates and impact of youths’ discrimination experiences and peer victimization, our data provide additional support for the contention that, indeed, perceptions of racial discrimination matter. Although there is no need to legitimize youths’ perceptions of racial discrimination in our view, we hope that these data, in conjunction with the literature describing the effects of victimization, can be used to motivate further study of the link between perceptions of discrimination and actual victimization due to race or ethnicity. We also hope that the findings highlight the continued significance of examining the impact of racial discrimination on the developmental livelihoods of African American and Latino youth.

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